

# Indigenous Religious Traditions of the Monpas of Dirang: An Anthropological Study

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## Abstract

The Monpas of Dirang in West Kameng District of Arunachal Pradesh are among the oldest Buddhist communities inhabiting the Eastern Himalayas. Despite the widespread acceptance of Tibetan Buddhism, numerous indigenous religious beliefs and ritual practices rooted in the pre-Buddhist Bon tradition continue to influence their socio-cultural and religious life. The present study examines the indigenous animistic faith of the Dirang Monpas, focusing on their cosmology, sacred geography, local deities, ritual practices, and the institution of village priests. Employing a qualitative ethnographic approach, the study is based on extensive fieldwork conducted in Dirang, Sangti, Lish, and Namshu-Thembang villages through participant observation, scheduled and unstructured interviews with village elders, Bonpu, Yumin, Buddhist monks, and community leaders. The findings reveal that the indigenous Bon faith is centered on the worship of mountains, rivers, forests, rocks, and other natural elements believed to be inhabited by benevolent and malevolent supernatural beings. Ritual specialists perform ceremonies to maintain harmony between the human and supernatural worlds, ensuring the protection, prosperity, and well-being of the community. The study further demonstrates that the spread of Tibetan Buddhism did not replace the indigenous Bon faith but facilitated a process of religious accommodation and syncretism, whereby local deities and ritual practices were incorporated into the Buddhist religious system. This interaction has produced a distinctive composite religious tradition unique to the Monpas of Dirang. The paper contributes to the growing scholarship on indigenous Himalayan religions by documenting an important but relatively underexplored aspect of Monpa culture and highlights the significance of preserving indigenous religious knowledge in the context of rapid socio-cultural transformation.

**Keywords:** Bon Religion, Monpas, Dirang, Indigenous Religion, Animism, Rituals, Religious Syncretism, Arunachal Pradesh.

## 1. Introduction

Religion has historically constituted one of the most significant institutions in shaping the social organization, cultural identity, and worldview of indigenous communities across the Himalayan region. Among the tribal societies of Arunachal Pradesh, religion functions not merely as a system of spiritual beliefs but also as a comprehensive cultural framework regulating relationships between humans, nature, and the supernatural. The Monpas of Dirang, located in the West Kameng district of Arunachal Pradesh, represent one such indigenous community whose religious life illustrates the coexistence of ancient animistic traditions and Tibetan Buddhism. Although Tibetan Buddhism has remained the dominant

religious tradition among the Monpas for several centuries, numerous indigenous beliefs rooted in the pre-Buddhist Bon tradition continue to survive in everyday life and ritual practices (Karmay, 1998).

The Monpas constitute one of the major Scheduled Tribes inhabiting the north-western frontier of Arunachal Pradesh. Geographically, they are distributed across three broad cultural regions: Tawang, Dirang, and Kalaktang. While linguistic and regional differences exist among these groups, they share a common historical heritage, cultural traditions, and religious worldview. The Monpas of Dirang, who identify themselves as Tsangla, possess a distinctive religious culture in which Buddhist philosophy coexists with indigenous ritual practices inherited from earlier generations.

Before the introduction of Buddhism into the eastern Himalayan region, the Monpas practiced an indigenous animistic religion that closely resembled the Bon tradition of ancient Tibet. Bon was the dominant religious system of Tibet before the seventh century CE and was characterized by ancestor worship, shamanism, spirit propitiation, divination and elaborate rituals performed to appease supernatural beings inhabiting mountains, forests, rivers, lakes, rocks, and the atmosphere (Snellgrove, 1967; Hoffmann, 1961). Although Tibetan Bon later underwent substantial doctrinal transformation under Buddhist influence and evolved into Yungdrung Bon, many indigenous Himalayan communities retained older ritual traditions that remained largely unaffected by institutional religious reforms (Kværne, 1995).

Among the Dirang Monpas, this indigenous religious tradition survives in the worship of local deities such as Phu (mountain deities), Ke-lha (household deity) Yul-lha (territorial deities), Lu (water spirits), Sadok (earth spirits), Tsan, Dud (naga) and numerous guardian spirits believed to inhabit the natural environment. These supernatural beings are considered active agents capable of influencing human health, agricultural productivity, climatic conditions, and the overall prosperity of the community. Consequently, ritual specialists perform elaborate ceremonies to maintain harmony between the human world and the supernatural realm. Such beliefs represent an indigenous ecological worldview in which nature is not regarded merely as a physical resource but as a sacred domain inhabited by living spiritual entities (Eliade, 1959).

The spread of Buddhism into the Mon region did not eliminate these indigenous religious traditions. Historical evidence suggests that Buddhism gradually accommodated many local beliefs through a process of religious adaptation and cultural assimilation. Several indigenous deities were incorporated into Buddhist cosmology as protector deities, while Buddhist monks increasingly assumed responsibility for rituals previously performed exclusively by Bon priests. Simultaneously, local ritual specialists adopted Buddhist ethical principles and ritual symbolism without abandoning their indigenous cosmology. This long historical interaction produced a unique form of religious syncretism in which Buddhist philosophy and Bon ritualism coexist within a shared religious framework (Samuel, 2012).

Anthropological scholarship has increasingly recognized that indigenous religions cannot be adequately understood solely through theological perspectives. Rather, they constitute dynamic cultural systems that regulate social relationships, environmental ethics, collective memory, and community identity (Durkheim, 1912/1995). The ritual performances of the Monpas likewise serve multiple social functions beyond religious devotion. They reinforce community solidarity, legitimize traditional authority, preserve ecological knowledge, and regulate interactions between human beings and their natural surroundings. The sacred landscape of the Dirang region, comprising mountains, forests, rivers, and sacred groves, therefore represents not only a religious geography but also an indigenous system of environmental conservation.

Despite the growing body of literature on Tibetan Buddhism and Himalayan cultures, comparatively little scholarly attention has been devoted to the surviving Bon traditions among the Monpas of Dirang. Existing studies have primarily focused on monasteries, Buddhist institutions, festivals, or material culture, whereas the indigenous religious system, ritual specialists, sacred geography, and cosmological beliefs remain inadequately documented. Rapid modernization, expansion of formal education, increased mobility, and changing lifestyles are also transforming traditional religious practices, making systematic documentation increasingly urgent.

The present study seeks to address this gap by examining the indigenous Bon traditions of the Dirang Monpas through ethnographic investigation. It explores their cosmological beliefs, sacred landscapes, ritual practices, priestly institutions, and the continuing interaction between Bon and Tibetan Buddhism. By documenting these indigenous traditions, the study contributes to broader anthropological debates concerning religious syncretism, indigenous knowledge systems, and cultural continuity in the Eastern Himalayas. Furthermore, it demonstrates that Bon among the Monpas should not be viewed merely as a relic of the past but as a living religious tradition that continues to shape cultural identity, environmental ethics, and community life in contemporary Arunachal Pradesh.

## **2. Review of Literature**

The study of Bon religion has attracted considerable scholarly attention over the past century, particularly in relation to the religious history of Tibet and the Himalayan region. Nevertheless, research concerning the indigenous Bon traditions of the Monpas of Arunachal Pradesh remains limited. Existing literature largely concentrates on Tibetan Buddhism, monastic institutions, and political history, while comparatively fewer studies examine the survival of pre-Buddhist religious beliefs among the Monpas. The available scholarship, however, provides an important theoretical and historical foundation for understanding the indigenous faith of the Dirang Monpas.

One of the earliest systematic studies of Bon religion was undertaken by David L. Snellgrove (1967) in *The Nine Ways of Bon*. Through the translation and interpretation of Bon religious texts, Snellgrove demonstrated that Bon was not merely a primitive form of spirit worship, as earlier scholars had suggested, but a sophisticated religious tradition possessing its own philosophy, rituals, scriptures and cosmology. His work challenged the earlier assumption that Bon was simply a collection of magical practices and established it as an organized religious system that developed independently before interacting extensively with Buddhism.

Helmut Hoffmann (1961), in *The Religions of Tibet*, examined the historical development of Bon within the broader context of Tibetan civilization. Hoffmann argued that pre-Buddhist Bon combined animistic beliefs, ancestor worship, divination, shamanistic healing, and sacrificial rituals. According to him, the Bon religion represented one of the earliest institutional expressions of indigenous Himalayan spirituality. His work remains significant because it highlights the continuity between Tibetan Bon traditions and the indigenous religious practices found among several Himalayan tribal communities.

A major contribution to Bon studies was made by Samten Gyaltsen Karmay (1998) in *The Arrow and the Spindle*. He emphasized that Bon should not be viewed solely as a rival of Buddhism but as an evolving religious tradition that continuously adapted to changing historical circumstances. He demonstrated how Bon gradually absorbed Buddhist philosophical concepts while preserving its indigenous cosmology and ritual practices. His interpretation of Bon as a dynamic and adaptive tradition

provides an important framework for understanding the religious syncretism observed among the Monpas of Dirang.

Similarly, Per Kværne (1995), in *The Bon Religion of Tibet: The Iconography of a Living Tradition*, argued that Bon survived centuries of Buddhist influence by reorganizing its doctrines, rituals, and institutional structures. He described the emergence of Yungdrung Bon, which incorporated Buddhist philosophical concepts while retaining its distinctive religious identity. His work illustrates that Bon is not merely a historical relic but continues to exist as a living religious tradition in several Himalayan regions.

The broader cultural and religious history of Tibet has been extensively documented by Giuseppe Tucci (1988) and R. A. Stein (1972). Tucci highlighted the interaction between indigenous religious traditions and Buddhism in shaping Tibetan civilization, while Stein emphasized the role of local deities, sacred landscapes, and territorial cults in the formation of Tibetan religious life. Their studies demonstrate that Buddhism expanded by assimilating indigenous religious practices rather than completely replacing them, a process that closely resembles the religious transformation witnessed among the Monpas of Arunachal Pradesh.

The anthropological understanding of religion has also benefited from the work of Geoffrey Samuel (2012), who examined Tibetan Buddhism within its broader social and cultural context. Samuel argued that ritual specialists, sacred landscapes, healing ceremonies, and local deities continue to play an important role even in predominantly Buddhist societies. His observations support the argument that indigenous cosmological beliefs persist alongside institutional Buddhism rather than disappearing altogether.

Studies focusing specifically on Arunachal Pradesh provide valuable ethnographic insights into tribal societies but rarely examine Bon traditions in depth. Verrier Elwin (1957), in *A Philosophy for NEFA*, emphasized the importance of preserving the cultural heritage of indigenous communities in the North-East Frontier Agency (present-day Arunachal Pradesh). Although Elwin did not specifically analyse Bon religion among the Monpas, his work established the importance of studying tribal belief systems as integral components of indigenous identity.

Likewise, Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf (1962) documented the social organization, customary institutions, and religious life of several tribes inhabiting the eastern Himalayas. His ethnographic approach demonstrated that indigenous religion forms an inseparable part of social organization and community governance. His methodological emphasis on participant observation significantly influences contemporary anthropological research on Himalayan societies.

Among scholars working specifically on the Monpas, Niranjan Sarkar (1980) examined the relationship between Buddhism and indigenous religious traditions in his study of the Monpas and Sherdukpens. Sarkar observed that despite the predominance of Tibetan Buddhism, many indigenous ritual practices continued to survive within village life. His work remains one of the earliest attempts to recognize the persistence of pre-Buddhist beliefs among the Monpas.

Government publications, particularly the *Gazetteer of India: East Kameng, West Kameng and Tawang Districts* (Government of Arunachal Pradesh, 1994), provide important historical information regarding the geographical distribution, socio-cultural organization, and religious practices of the Monpas. These publications identify numerous indigenous rituals associated with agriculture, village protection, and ancestor worship but do not provide detailed anthropological analysis of Bon cosmology or priesthood.

Theoretical perspectives developed by Edward Burnett Tylor (1871), Émile Durkheim (1912/1995), Mircea Eliade (1959), and Victor Turner (1969) are particularly useful for interpreting Monpa religious practices. Tylor's theory of animism explains the belief that natural objects possess spiritual beings. Durkheim viewed religion as a mechanism for strengthening social solidarity and collective consciousness. Eliade emphasized the symbolic significance of sacred space and sacred landscapes, while Turner interpreted rituals as social processes that reinforce communal identity and social cohesion. Collectively, these theoretical perspectives provide an analytical framework for understanding the religious worldview of the Monpas beyond simple descriptions of ritual practices.

More recent anthropological studies have increasingly focused on indigenous ecological knowledge, sacred landscapes, and environmental ethics. These studies suggest that traditional religious beliefs often function as informal systems of environmental conservation by regulating human interaction with forests, rivers, mountains, and wildlife. The Monpas' reverence for sacred mountains, water bodies, forests, and territorial deities similarly reflects an indigenous ecological philosophy that contributes to sustainable resource management and community conservation practices.

### **Research Gap**

Despite the substantial scholarship on Tibetan Buddhism and Bon religion, significant gaps remain in the study of the indigenous religious traditions of the Monpas of Dirang. Most existing studies focus either on the historical development of Bon in Tibet or on the institutional aspects of Tibetan Buddhism. Comparatively little attention has been devoted to examining the survival, transformation, and contemporary relevance of pre-Buddhist Bon beliefs among the Monpas of Arunachal Pradesh.

Furthermore, previous research has largely overlooked the indigenous cosmology, sacred geography, ritual specialists, healing practices, and environmental dimensions of Monpa religious life. The interaction between Bon and Buddhism has often been discussed in general terms without analyzing the specific mechanisms through which local deities, rituals, and beliefs have been assimilated into Buddhist practice. There is also limited ethnographic documentation based on primary fieldwork concerning the changing role of Bonpu (Priest) and Yumin (Oracle) in contemporary Monpa society.

The present study seeks to address these gaps through ethnographic investigation based on field observations, interviews, and participant observation. It critically examines the continuity and transformation of indigenous Bon traditions among the Dirang Monpas and analyses how religious syncretism has shaped their cultural identity in the context of social change and modernization. By doing so, the study contributes to the broader discourse on indigenous religions, Himalayan anthropology, and the preservation of intangible cultural heritage.

### **Bon-Buddhist Religious Syncretism: Historical Transformation and Contemporary Relevance**

One of the most distinctive features of the religious culture of the Monpas of Dirang is the gradual synthesis of indigenous Bon traditions and Tibetan Buddhism. Unlike many regions where the spread of organized religions resulted in the complete replacement of indigenous beliefs, the Monpa experience illustrates a process of religious accommodation, cultural adaptation, **and** syncretism. Rather than disappearing, indigenous Bon beliefs were incorporated into Buddhist cosmology, allowing both traditions to coexist and mutually influence one another. Consequently, contemporary Monpa religion represents a composite religious system in which Buddhist philosophy and indigenous ritual practices function together within everyday life.

The concept of religious syncretism refers to the blending of beliefs, rituals, and symbols from different religious traditions into a new cultural form. Anthropologists regard syncretism as a natural consequence of prolonged cultural interaction, especially in frontier societies where different civilizations meet (Stewart & Shaw, 1994). The Monpa religious tradition exemplifies this phenomenon, demonstrating how indigenous cosmology survived by adapting to Buddhist doctrines rather than resisting them.

### Historical Interaction between Bon and Buddhism

The indigenous Bon religion was firmly established among the Monpas long before Buddhism entered the eastern Himalayan region. Similar to the pre-Buddhist religion of Tibet, Bon emphasized the worship of natural forces, mountain deities, territorial spirits, ancestral powers, and supernatural beings associated with forests, rivers, and sacred landscapes. Ritual specialists known as Bonpu and Yumin mediated between humans and these invisible forces through ceremonies, sacrifices, healing rituals, and divination.

The introduction of Buddhism into the Mon region is traditionally associated with Guru Padmasambhava during the eighth century CE. However, the widespread institutionalization of Buddhism occurred much later with the establishment of the Tawang Monastery in 1681 CE and the subsequent missionary activities of Droang Rinpoche and Kechang Doyen Tenzing during the eighteenth century. These Buddhist teachers did not seek to eradicate indigenous beliefs entirely. Instead, they gradually incorporated local religious practices into Buddhist ritual systems.

As a result, Buddhism spread peacefully among the Monpas while allowing indigenous religious traditions to continue alongside monastic institutions.

### Incorporation of Local Deities into Buddhism

One of the clearest manifestations of religious syncretism is the incorporation of indigenous deities into Buddhist cosmology. Many local mountain gods, territorial spirits, and guardian deities that were formerly worshipped exclusively through Bon rituals are now recognized as **Dharmapālas** (Dharma Protectors) within Tibetan Buddhism. Rather than being viewed as hostile spirits, they became protectors of Buddhist teachings and guardians of monasteries and villages. For example, important indigenous deities such as Ke Lha Tangpu, Ata Sapchang, Ata Namphey, Aata Diphung, Ama Jomu, Dungley Gepu, Phuwangle etc. are worshipped by both Bon priests and Buddhist monks.

Buddhist rituals dedicated to these deities follow instructions preserved in the ritual manual Lhandi Karso, traditionally attributed to Kechang Doyen Tenzing. This manual demonstrates the systematic integration of indigenous deities into Buddhist ritual practice while preserving their local identity.

### Transformation of Ritual Practices

The influence of Buddhism significantly transformed indigenous ritual practices without eliminating their underlying religious purposes. Historically, Bon rituals included blood sacrifices offered to local deities in exchange for protection and prosperity. Oral traditions suggest that animals such as goats, sheep, poultry, and occasionally wild animals were sacrificed during major communal ceremonies. Under Buddhist influence, these practices gradually underwent profound transformation.

The important changes include:

- Replacement of animal sacrifice with Torma (ritual cakes)
- Increasing emphasis on symbolic rather than literal offerings

- Introduction of Tse-thar (release of living animals)
- Greater use of Buddhist mantras
- Incorporation of prayer flags carrying Buddhist inscriptions
- Performance of smoke offerings accompanied by Buddhist prayers

These changes illustrate how Buddhist ethical principles, particularly compassion (*karuṇā*) and non-violence (**ahimsā**), reshaped indigenous ritual traditions while preserving their social and symbolic functions.

### **Shared Ritual Space**

In contemporary Monpa society, Bon and Buddhist rituals frequently coexist within the same ceremonial context. During annual festivals and community rituals:

- Buddhist monks chant Buddhist scriptures
- Bon priests invoke indigenous mountain deities
- Prayer flags bearing Buddhist mantras are erected at traditional Bon sacred sites
- Offerings are simultaneously dedicated to Buddhist protectors and local guardian spirits

Such shared ritual participation reflects not religious contradiction but cultural complementarity. Community members generally perceive no conflict between consulting Buddhist monks for scriptural rituals and Bon priests for indigenous ceremonies related to agriculture, healing, or village protection.

### **Religious Syncretism and Cultural Identity**

For the Monpas, religious identity is not defined exclusively by doctrinal adherence but by participation in a shared cultural tradition. Most Monpas identify themselves as devoted Buddhists while simultaneously maintaining strong faith in indigenous mountain deities, territorial spirits, ancestral powers, and ritual specialists. This dual religious identity demonstrates that religious affiliation and indigenous belief are not mutually exclusive. Instead, they form complementary dimensions of Monpa cultural identity.

The coexistence of these traditions has contributed significantly to:

- Cultural continuity.
- Preservation of oral traditions.
- Protection of sacred landscapes.
- Strengthening of village solidarity.
- Maintenance of indigenous ecological ethics.

### **Modernization and Changing Religious Practices**

Rapid socio-economic changes have begun to transform traditional religious life in the Dirang region. Several factors influencing indigenous religious practices include:

- Expansion of modern education
- Urbanization
- Improved healthcare services
- Road connectivity
- Tourism
- Digital communication
- Migration of younger generations

- Declining number of Bon priests

Although Buddhism continues to flourish through monasteries and formal religious education, indigenous Bon traditions increasingly depend upon elderly ritual specialists for their survival. Many younger Monpas continue to participate in annual community rituals but possess limited knowledge of traditional chants, ritual symbolism, and oral histories. Consequently, several aspects of indigenous religious heritage face the risk of gradual disappearance.

### **Contemporary Relevance of Bon Traditions**

Despite these challenges, Bon traditions remain highly relevant within contemporary Monpa society. Their continued importance extends beyond religion into several domains:

#### **Cultural Heritage**

Bon rituals preserve oral literature, traditional music, sacred chants, customary law, and historical memory.

#### **Environmental Conservation**

Sacred beliefs associated with mountains, rivers, forests, and wildlife continue to discourage environmental degradation and promote sustainable resource management.

#### **Traditional Healthcare**

Healing rituals provide psychological reassurance and cultural support, particularly in remote villages where biomedical services remain limited.

#### **Social Cohesion**

Community rituals strengthen collective identity by bringing together households, lineages, and neighbouring villages in shared religious celebrations.

#### **Indigenous Knowledge**

Bon priests preserve valuable ethno-botanical, ecological, and ritual knowledge accumulated through generations of observation and experience.

### **Anthropological Significance**

The religious history of the Monpas demonstrates that indigenous religions do not necessarily disappear following the arrival of organised world religions. Instead, they may undergo processes of adaptation, reinterpretation, and integration that produce unique forms of religious expression.

The Monpa experience therefore provides an important case study for understanding:

- Religious change
- Cultural resilience
- Indigenous identity
- Himalayan religious history
- Syncretism
- Environmental anthropology
- Anthropology of religion

The coexistence of Bon and Buddhism among the Monpas challenges simplistic models of religious replacement and instead illustrates the dynamic and negotiated nature of cultural transformation.

The interaction between Bon and Buddhism among the Monpas of Dirang represents a remarkable example of religious accommodation and cultural continuity. Indigenous beliefs concerning sacred landscapes, guardian deities, ritual specialists, and ecological ethics have survived not in isolation but

through adaptation within a Buddhist framework. This synthesis has produced a distinctive religious tradition that continues to shape Monpa identity, social organization, and environmental practices. Recognizing and documenting this composite religious heritage is essential for preserving the intangible cultural legacy of the Eastern Himalayas and for enriching broader scholarly debates on indigenous religions and religious syncretism.

## Discussion

The findings of the present study reveal that the indigenous Bon faith of the Monpas of Dirang represents a dynamic religious tradition that has survived through adaptation rather than isolation. Although Tibetan Buddhism has remained the dominant institutional religion for several centuries, indigenous cosmological beliefs, ritual practices, and shamanic traditions continue to influence the religious life of the Monpas. The coexistence of these two traditions illustrates a remarkable process of cultural continuity and religious syncretism that challenges conventional assumptions regarding the disappearance of indigenous religions following the spread of organized faiths.

The study further demonstrates that the Bon religion among the Monpas is not merely a residual or obsolete belief system but an active cultural institution regulating social behaviour, environmental ethics, community solidarity, and traditional healing. The persistence of these traditions reflects the resilience of indigenous knowledge systems despite increasing modernization and socio-economic transformation.

### ***Bon Faith through the Perspective of Animism***

One of the most significant theoretical perspectives applicable to the findings is Edward Burnett Tylor's (1871) theory of Animism. He argued that the earliest form of religion originated from humanity's belief that natural objects possessed souls or spirits. Mountains, rivers, forests, trees, rocks, and animals were believed to possess supernatural agency capable of influencing human life.

The present study strongly supports this theoretical framework. Among the Monpas the Mountains are worshipped as living guardian deities, Rivers and springs are inhabited by Lu (water spirits), Forests shelter territorial spirits, Rocks and caves possess supernatural powers and Agricultural fields require ritual permission before cultivation. These beliefs demonstrate that nature is not perceived as an inert physical environment but as a living spiritual universe requiring reciprocal relationships between humans and supernatural beings.

However, unlike Tylor's evolutionary assumption that animism represents a primitive stage destined to disappear with civilisation, the Monpa case illustrates the continued vitality of animistic beliefs within a modern Buddhist society.

### ***Bon Priesthood and Shamanism***

The institution of the Yumin exhibits many characteristics associated with shamanism, particularly as described by Mircea Eliade (1964). According to him, shamans serve as intermediaries between the human and supernatural worlds through trance, spirit possession, healing, divination, and ritual communication with invisible beings. The Yumin fulfills all these functions.

The present study documents that the Yumin:

- Enters trance during rituals
- Communicates with guardian deities
- Diagnoses spiritually caused illnesses
- Performs exorcisms

- Retrieves lost souls
- Protects villages from supernatural threats

Unlike ordinary ritual specialists, the Yumin is believed to maintain a lifelong relationship with specific guardian deities, thereby functioning simultaneously as healer, oracle, and spiritual mediator.

These findings reinforce Eliade's argument that shamanism represents a sophisticated religious institution rather than mere superstition.

### ***Sacred Geography and Durkheim's Theory of Religion***

Émile Durkheim (1912/1995) distinguished between the **sacred** and the **profane**, arguing that religious symbols ultimately represent society itself. The sacred mountains, forests, rivers, and village deities of the Monpas clearly illustrate this principle.

The sacred landscapes function as:

- Symbols of collective identity
- Markers of territorial boundaries
- Centres of communal ritual
- Sources of moral authority
- Institutions regulating environmental behaviour

Annual ceremonies such as Lha-soi-shi strengthen collective solidarity by bringing together all members of the community in shared ritual participation. Thus, religion among the Monpas performs an important social function by reinforcing cooperation, collective memory, and community identity.

### ***Religious Syncretism***

Perhaps the most significant finding of the study concerns the process of religious syncretism. Rather than replacing Bon traditions, Tibetan Buddhism gradually absorbed many indigenous beliefs. Evidence collected during fieldwork demonstrates that:

- Buddhist monks worship indigenous mountain deities
- Bon priests employ Buddhist ritual symbols
- Prayer flags contain Buddhist mantras
- Local deities are recognized as Dharma Protectors
- Animal sacrifice has largely been replaced by symbolic offerings
- Buddhist ethical principles influence Bon rituals

This process supports anthropological theories which view religious change as an adaptive and negotiated process rather than a complete cultural rupture.

The Monpa case therefore contributes significantly to comparative studies of religious transformation in the Himalayan region.

### ***Indigenous Religion and Environmental Conservation***

An important contribution of the present study lies in demonstrating the environmental dimension of indigenous religion. Modern environmental anthropology increasingly recognizes that traditional belief systems often function as effective mechanisms for biodiversity conservation. Among the Monpas:

- Sacred forests remain protected
- Rivers are safeguarded from pollution
- Hunting near sacred sites is discouraged
- Mountains receive ritual protection
- Construction activities require ritual permission

Although these practices originate from religious beliefs rather than environmental legislation, they have

historically contributed to sustainable resource management. This finding suggests that indigenous religious knowledge should be recognized as an important component of contemporary environmental conservation strategies.

### ***Traditional Healing and Indigenous Knowledge***

The study also highlights the continued relevance of indigenous healing practices. Although biomedical healthcare has expanded considerably, many villagers continue to consult Bon priests for illnesses believed to originate from supernatural causes.

The indigenous healing rituals provide:

- Psychological reassurance
- Cultural familiarity
- Spiritual comfort
- Community support
- Traditional therapeutic knowledge

From a medical anthropological perspective, these practices demonstrate that health cannot be understood solely through biological explanations but must also be examined within broader cultural and religious contexts.

### ***Challenges to Indigenous Religious Traditions***

Field observations indicate that the Bon tradition is presently undergoing significant transformation. The major challenges in Bon tradition include:

- Declining number of Bon priests
- Weakening oral transmission
- Modern education
- Urban migration
- Changing food habits
- Reduced participation among younger generations
- Expansion of digital lifestyles
- Declining interest in ritual apprenticeship

As ritual knowledge is transmitted almost entirely through oral instruction, the disappearance of elderly ritual specialists threatens the survival of a substantial body of indigenous cultural heritage. Without systematic documentation and community participation, many ritual chants, oral narratives, and ceremonial practices may disappear within the coming generations.

### ***Contribution to Himalayan Anthropology***

The present research contributes to Himalayan anthropology in several important ways.

Firstly, it provides one of the few detailed ethnographic studies focusing specifically on the indigenous Bon traditions of the Dirang Monpas.

Secondly, it demonstrates that indigenous religions remain active cultural systems rather than historical relics.

Thirdly, it expands scholarly understanding of the interaction between Bon and Tibetan Buddhism in the Eastern Himalayas.

Finally, the study illustrates the importance of integrating indigenous ecological knowledge into broader discussions concerning cultural heritage, environmental conservation, and sustainable development.

### ***Implications for Future Research***

The present study opens several possibilities for further investigation. Future research may focus on:

- Comparative studies between the Monpa Bon tradition and Tibetan Yungdrung Bon
- Documentation of Bon ritual chants and oral literature
- Gender roles in indigenous religious practices
- Indigenous ecological knowledge and climate change
- Digital preservation of Monpa ritual traditions
- Comparative studies with the Sherdukpen, Aka and Miji communities

Such research would significantly enrich the anthropology of religion and contribute to safeguarding the intangible cultural heritage of Arunachal Pradesh.

## Conclusion

The present study has examined the indigenous Bon faith and belief system of the Monpas of Dirang in West Kameng District, Arunachal Pradesh, with particular emphasis on its cosmology, ritual practices, sacred geography, and the role of local ritual specialists. Although Tibetan Buddhism has remained the dominant institutional religion in the region for several centuries, the findings demonstrate that the indigenous Bon tradition continues to occupy an important place in the religious and cultural life of the Monpa community. Rather than existing as two separate religious systems, Bon and Buddhism have evolved through a long process of interaction, accommodation, and mutual adaptation, resulting in a distinctive form of religious syncretism that characterizes contemporary Monpa society.

The study reveals that the indigenous worldview of the Monpas is fundamentally animistic, where mountains, rivers, forests, lakes, rocks and other natural elements are perceived as sacred entities inhabited by powerful spiritual beings. These beliefs continue to regulate community behaviour, agricultural practices, environmental conservation and social relationships. Sacred landscapes are not merely geographical features but constitute important centres of religious identity and collective memory. Consequently, the Monpa understanding of nature reflects a holistic worldview in which humans, deities, ancestors, and the natural environment exist in an interconnected relationship.

The research further demonstrates that ritual practices remain central to the maintenance of this indigenous cosmology. Ceremonies such as Lha-soi-shi, Kakung Torkhan, Sur, Lusang, Tse-thar, and various healing and exorcistic rituals function not only as religious performances but also as mechanisms for preserving social cohesion, ensuring ecological balance and reaffirming communal identity. The gradual replacement of animal sacrifice with symbolic offerings such as Torma and Tse-thar illustrates the profound influence of Buddhist ethical principles while simultaneously preserving the symbolic essence of indigenous ritual traditions.

Another significant contribution of this study is the documentation of the Bon priesthood, comprising the Bonpu, Yumin, and Tsipa Lama. These ritual specialists continue to serve as healers, diviners, astrologers, mediators between the human and supernatural worlds, and custodians of indigenous cultural knowledge. Their ritual authority extends beyond religious practice to include traditional medicine, environmental ethics, conflict resolution, and the transmission of oral traditions. However, field observations indicate that the number of traditional priests is steadily declining due to modernization, formal education, urban migration, changing lifestyles, and the weakening of oral transmission. Unless systematic efforts are undertaken to document and preserve their knowledge, a substantial portion of the Monpas' intangible cultural heritage may disappear within the coming generations.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings support major anthropological interpretations of religion. The Monpa belief system confirms Edward B. Tylor's theory of animism through its attribution of spiritual agency to natural phenomena, while the institution of the Yumin reflects the characteristics of shamanism discussed by Mircea Eliade. Likewise, the sacred geography and communal rituals of the Monpas illustrate Émile Durkheim's understanding of religion as a source of collective consciousness and social solidarity. At the same time, the coexistence of Bon and Buddhism offers a valuable example of religious syncretism, demonstrating that indigenous religious traditions can adapt creatively without losing their essential cultural identity.

The study also has important implications for environmental anthropology. Indigenous beliefs regarding sacred mountains, forests, rivers, and territorial deities have historically functioned as effective mechanisms of environmental conservation. Religious restrictions on deforestation, pollution, and the exploitation of sacred landscapes have contributed significantly to the sustainable management of natural resources in the region. In the context of contemporary environmental challenges, such indigenous ecological knowledge deserves greater recognition within conservation policies and sustainable development initiatives.

Despite these contributions, the study acknowledges certain limitations. The research is confined primarily to selected villages of Dirang Circle and therefore does not encompass the entire diversity of Bon traditions among all Monpa sub-groups. Furthermore, many ritual chants, oral narratives and ceremonial procedures remain undocumented because they are transmitted exclusively through oral tradition and are often restricted to ritual specialists. Future research should undertake comparative studies of Bon traditions among other Himalayan communities, including the Tawang Monpas, Sherdukpens, Akas (Hrussos), and Mijis, while also documenting ritual literature, sacred chants, indigenous ecological knowledge, and oral histories through audio-visual ethnographic methods.

In conclusion, the indigenous Bon faith of the Monpas of Dirang is not a relic of the past but a living religious tradition that continues to shape community identity, cultural values, and ecological ethics. Its remarkable coexistence with Tibetan Buddhism represents one of the most significant examples of religious accommodation in the Himalayan region. Preserving this rich cultural heritage is essential not only for the Monpa community but also for understanding the wider history of indigenous religions, religious transformation, and cultural resilience in South Asia. The documentation and scholarly study of these traditions will contribute substantially to the fields of anthropology, religious studies, Himalayan history, and indigenous knowledge systems while supporting ongoing efforts to safeguard the intangible cultural heritage of Arunachal Pradesh.

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